

Access to a College Degree or Just College Debt?

Moving beyond admission to graduation

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A defining feature of U.S. higher education is its commitment to access and opportunity. The growing number of policies and programs targeting college access demonstrates that this commitment remains steadfast. In order to make college affordable for the economically disadvantaged, an increasing number of selective, well-endowed colleges and universities, including Amherst, Brown, Harvard and Wellesley, have developed policies of free or reduced tuition. Other colleges and universities, including Clark University, Curry College and University of Massachusetts Boston, have created pipelines into their institutions through partnerships with high schools or districts, early college and/or dual enrollment, and special bridge programs.

College access programs that prepare students to aspire to and apply to college are important but not sufficient. While access to a college education, especially for underrepresented student populations, has improved, similarly upward trends in college graduation rates have failed to materialize. Access into an institution is important, but if students fail to graduate, then it becomes access to debt instead of access to a degree. Moreover, as costs increase and employment opportunities for those without a degree decrease, the consequences of not graduating have become dire. Accreditation groups, legislators, prospective students, their families and funders are increasingly holding colleges and universities accountable for student retention and graduation. Therefore, the focus of efforts to improve access has moved from college admission to college graduation.

Researchers and practitioners have learned much about the reasons students drop out and what colleges can do to retain them. While the tendency is often to create a “Retention Committee,” “Retention Office” or “Retention Program,” this focus may not achieve the ultimate goal of improving student success. What is needed is sustained commitment to allocating the resources, time and effort to improving student success and achievement, which in the end will also produce the desired retention results.

Unfortunately, there is no quick fix or generic solution to improving students’ academic success and graduation rates. Most retention programs focus on students’ first year of college because this is when

students are most likely to drop out. However, getting students on track to graduate actually begins before students enroll in college and continues as they move through identifiable milestones toward graduation.

Preparation for College. Research indicates that the path to a college degree begins long before students enter college. While the Education Trust has promoted the concept that “college begins in kindergarten,” most college access programs target middle school aged children to ensure they have the aspirations and preparation to pursue a postsecondary degree. By seventh grade, students and families need to be academically on track to enter a college-preparatory curriculum in high school. As former U.S. Education Department analyst Clifford Adelman observed in *The Toolbox Revisited: Paths to Degree Completion From High School Through College*, this includes, at minimum, four years of English and four years of

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math, including Algebra 2. We also know, from Center for Education Policy Research director David Conley’s *Toward a Comprehensive Conception of College Readiness*, that students must begin to acquire the skills and competencies, including time management, organization, note taking and study skills, which are as necessary for college success as content knowledge. A number of college-prep programs including: AVID (Advancement Via Individual Determination), College Bound, and GEAR UP focus on developing these academic behaviors and habits of mind alongside core academic subject knowledge.

High School-to-College Transition. Even when students have been successful in getting into college, data on student attrition indicate that they are particularly vulnerable during their freshman year and specifically during their first semester. This may be because they aren’t well prepared for the increased demands and expectations of college or because they have not yet become engaged and integrated into their college environment. Colleges and universities have responded by creating extended orientation and first-year programs to help students establish a strong support system and

develop connections to the college community. Recently, Holy Cross expanded its optional first-year program, which created living/learning communities among freshmen. The program is now a requirement for all incoming first-year students. Additionally, an array of programs designed to ease the transition have become *de rigueur* on most college campuses. Examples include summer bridge programs, freshman seminars, linked courses, small learning communities, peer mentors and academic coaches.

Despite these supports, many students enter college unprepared for college-level work. In 2006 ACT reported that three out of four ACT-tested high school graduates were not prepared to take credit-bearing, entry-level college courses. While many higher education institutions offer developmental, review or remedial courses to

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prepare students to succeed academically, they tend to follow a “one size fits all” approach, rather than tailoring instruction to meet the specific challenges students face. Typically, these courses are staffed by low-paid, transitory faculty and their high failure rates result in students becoming stalled and discouraged from pursuing college degrees. Community colleges have been at the forefront of innovation in the area of developmental coursework, but few of these practices have made their way to public and private four-year colleges and universities.

A recent trend in college retention programming is to focus on parents and significant others. Results of the annual Cooperative Institutional Research Program Survey of college freshmen indicate that students turn to and value their parents’ help in transitioning to college. Not surprisingly, many colleges and universities are creating special orientation sessions, newsletters and networks to help parents and guardians learn how to support their child’s successful transition to college and adulthood. Further development in this area is needed to address the special concerns and issues of students and families who lack college-going experience.

College Progression. Colleges must continue to monitor students’ progress beyond the first year and devise strategies to detect students who are struggling and implement interventions to help them get back on track toward graduation. “Early alert” programs allow faculty and staff to identify students who may not be attending classes, who may be performing subpar academically, having financial difficulties or exhibiting anti-social behavior in or out of class. Once identified, these students can receive active intervention by an adviser, academic coach or mentor to ensure that

they get the help they need to be successful. Western Connecticut State University, St. Joseph College and Mount Ida College, among others, use an early alert system to flag students who may need intervention and referral to address challenges before they escalate.

Recognition of the notorious “sophomore slump” has spawned new initiatives to monitor and support sophomores, including retreats, seminars, special housing and extra advising. These programs are less widespread than first-year programs, but are becoming increasingly popular. Bridgewater State College, Green Mountain College and Brandeis University are among a growing list of colleges and universities that offer special programs targeting sophomores. Ultimately, these programs seek to wean students off the additional support, assuming that by the time students are juniors and seniors, they are fully engaged in their program of study and campus life.

College Graduation and Beyond. In a global, information-based economy that demands a highly skilled and knowledgeable workforce, the employment prospects for students who do not graduate from college are grim. With increased employability and earning power as incentives, students can be counseled to take advantage of internships, study-abroad programs and combined undergraduate/graduate programs. Some colleges offer senior seminars for students to synthesize and integrate their four-year learning experience. At Mount Ida College, for example, seniors are required to take capstone courses where they work under the close direction of faculty in fieldwork, research and independent study. In addition to preparing students for the world of work, these experiences often have a positive effect on retention.

Attention to improving college access, especially for underrepresented populations, is an important priority. But while preparing students to apply and enroll in college is a worthy goal, the focus needs to extend beyond college admission to ensure that students succeed academically and persist to graduation. In an era of scarce resources, this will require a new level of collaboration and cooperation between schools, colleges, nonprofits and corporate partners to ensure that students are able to earn a degree and not just accumulate debt.

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